

A Look Ahead: Iraqi Futures and Implications For U.S. Strategy and Regional Security in the 21st Century

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When the United States went to war in Iraq in March 2003, the professed goals were to end the repressive rule of Saddam Husayn's regime, uncover the long-hidden weapons of mass destruction that had eluded a decade of UN-led inspections, and prevent further cooperation between Baghdad and the Islamist extremists responsible for the attacks on September 11, 2001. Less mentioned but by no means absent was the intention of introducing real democratic values and institutions to Iraq and making the fledgling successor government a beacon for the region to emulate. Advisers to George W. Bush's Administration—dubbed the neoconservatives or neocons—quickly became known for their claims that the war would be quick, that the Iraqis would welcome the Americans as liberators and not conquerors and shower them with rose petals and rice, and that the Iraqis as the region's staunchest democrats would quickly turn the New Iraq into a democratic showplace that was the envy of the region. In the Pentagon, the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, was equally determined to make the war in Iraq the showcase of what a transformed military force could accomplish with smaller deployments and greater mission integration. The war of shock and awe was to usher in 21st century warfare against the new asymmetric kind of warfare of the future—the war on terrorism.

The images of the mission's goals and intentions in Iraq did not match the reality of Iraq. Iraq's military was quickly defeated but there were no weapons of mass destruction found, no confirmed evidence of the new terrorist networks that had caused 9/11, and no quick and easy transition to democratic rule. While most Iraqis were happy to see Saddam and his family dethroned, gratitude for liberation was a short-lived and transitory sentiment. The U.S.-led coalition force found itself unable or unwilling to deal with the post-war climate of violence, looting, sabotage, and terror. Understaffed on the military and civilian side and captive of the neocon strategic outlook, U.S. forces were unprepared to deal with the Iraq they entered and occupied. Instead of a warm welcome resembling the liberation of France in 1945, the American invasion force encountered determined resistance to their presence which quickly grew in strength and sophistication. The first American administrator for Iraq, Jay Garner, anticipated using Saddam's ministries and civil servants to administer the same kind of health and human services programs they had managed under 12 years of UN-imposed sanctions. He also expected to down-size and de-politicized the 400,000-man army and employ those released in public works

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projects, all on salary. Instead, he found burnt buildings, missing records, and no one to manage anything.

This clash between ideology and reality haunts U.S. efforts to restore political governance, begin economic reconstruction or define an exit strategy. I would like to examine briefly the history of Iraqi-American relations and how history, regime change, occupation and elections might affect Iraq and U.S. strategy and regional security. And that is a lot to do in 15 minutes!

1. U.S.-Iraq Relations Never Stable

American-Iraqi relations have followed an uneven course since the 1958 revolution that removed the pro-British monarchy and installed the first of several pro-Soviet revolutionary dictatorships. For a number of reasons, Iraq has shunned too close an encounter with the outside world, in part because of a strong sense of historical pride and independence, and in part out of suspicion of Western intentions and fear of neo-colonialism by the so-called great powers. It never joined the United Arab Republic as envisioned by Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasir and Syria, and belonged to CENTO and the Baghdad Pact only briefly. Iraq was instrumental in forming the rejectionist front in 1978 following Egyptian President Sadat's signing of a peace treaty with Israel; it convened a summit of Arab states in Baghdad, ended aid to Egypt, and helped create the rejectionist platform of the states on the frontline with Israel. A few months later, however, Baghdad broke once again with Damascus when Saddam Husayn announced he was assuming the presidency and purged the party of traitors whom he accused of plotting his overthrow with Syria.

The United States, for its part, rarely viewed Iraq as a reliable partner when it sought allies or surrogates in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia and Iran under the Shah were critical components of President Nixon's Twin Pillars strategy. Nixon preferred to work through local surrogates to maintain regional stability but Iraq was not regarded as a benign state. Iraq broke relations with the U.S. after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. They were re-instated briefly in the 1980s when it looked like Iran was on the verge of defeating Iraq in their 8-year long war. Iraq had a powerful advocate in Saudi Arabia and the small Arab Gulf states; they urged the U.S. to help Iraq because it was fighting to stem efforts by the Iranian Islamic revolution to export its revolution across the Gulf. During the Reagan Administration, the United States reopened its Embassy in Baghdad and offered Iraq help in its war effort. Iraq was not able to purchase components in the United States for its nuclear weapons projects in the 1980s but it received loans from the P.L. 480 program, which it used to purchase weapons instead of American agricultural products. Baghdad purchased biological agents from American labs and used open source data available from its American-supplied Atoms for Peace and other programs to study how to build a nuclear bomb. Relations remained cool but stable from the end of the war until the eve of Iraq's invasion and occupation of Kuwait. The Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations believed they could "do business" with Saddam Husayn and sent prominent emissaries, including Special Envoy Donald Rumsfeld in 1983 and Senator Robert Dole in 1989 to ease relations and encourage Iraq to "Buy American." Even after Saddam began issuing threats to Israel, Kuwait, and the UAE in the spring of 1990 and after revelations of the BNL scandal became public,

Washington persisted in its belief that Saddam could be “handled.” After all, Egyptian President Mubarak, Jordanian King Hussein, and Saudi King Fahd assured us that Saddam would do nothing to harm Israel or its Gulf neighbors.

Saddam Husayn had several misperceptions about American willingness to use its power to contain his ambitions in the Gulf. He saw the U.S. as risk averse, willing to bluster about forcing Iraq to change its policies, withdraw from Kuwait, or comply with UNSC resolutions but lacking the stomach for war. He often spoke about American loss of will to fight following the debacle of Viet Nam and often claimed that the Americans would retreat in haste once the body bags with dead American soldiers began coming home. In the days leading up to Operation Desert Storm—from his occupation of Kuwait in August 1990 to the outbreak of war in mid-January 1991—and in the decade after the war when Iraq was placed under onerous sanctions for its refusal to comply with the UNSC and give up its WMDs, Saddam was convinced that his former friends and allies would force the U.S. to retreat. Russia, China, and France, among others, tried but to no avail. Sanctions remained in force from August 1990 through March 2003, and Saddam was unable to bluff his way out of his American-designed isolation.

The 2003 war for regime change in Iraq ended the era of the republic of fear in Iraq and the Gulf. Baghdad would no longer be able to play its role of spoiler or protector of Gulf security or be part of the balance of power that had made the Gulf Arabs and the rejectionist front against Israel—especially the Palestinians—look to it for succor. But it did not end Iraqis suspicions of U.S. intentions and ambitions in Iraq and the region. The gratitude of liberation was quickly replaced by the resentment of occupation and impatience for self-rule.

2. Impact of War and Occupation on Iraq and its Neighbors

The period since the end of the Iraq war and the fall of Saddam Husayn has seen significant change and the promise—or threat—of more to come. For the Sunni Arabs of Iraq and their Sunni Arab neighbors, fear of Saddam has been replaced by worry about Iraq without Saddam. For the Shia and other minorities in the region—Kurds, Turkmen, Christians, Persians in some places, Arabs in others—relief with regime change in Baghdad and hopes for change at home have replaced the reluctant cooperation tacitly accorded by them to the mostly Sunni Arab ruling families in power in the Gulf. All are watching Iraq and the U.S. for signs of future commitment and engagement:

What do they worry about?

- ***They worry that the dangerous insurgencies plaguing Iraq will spread across their porous borders.*** They already have. Terrorist attacks have occurred or been thwarted in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar in the past several months.
- ***They worry that a Shia Awakening will revive dormant demands for political participation and economic liberalization.*** It already has. Where once there were

static and stable governments ruling in a long and unbroken tradition of single leader, family, or party, reform is now in the air. Succession has occurred in some states and is anticipated in others, as rulers grow old and ill—in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia aged and infirm rulers are about to be replaced by aged and infirm successors. In Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE a new generation of princes has assumed control of government but, as in Oman, the future leadership is uncertain. And, most interestingly, anti-government demonstrations occurred in Arab, Kurdish, and other non-Persian regions of Iran last week-end; I do not think this is the beginning of the end of the Ayatollahs and I wonder if the accounts have not been hyped. One press account claimed they were sparked by an announcement that the government intended to resettle several hundred thousand Arabs away from oil-rich Khuzistan province—3% of Iran's nearly 70 million people are Arab. Now that is truly unbelievable! In all of them, popular calls for political and economic reforms are growing more insistent along with the uncertainty of succession.

- ***They worry that the United States is helping create a crescent of Shia-dominated governments that will strengthen Iran and weaken the ability of the Sunni Arabs to defend themselves.*** Some see the U.S. as intentionally encouraging Shia rule in Iraq to keep it and the region weak, controllable, and dependent on U.S. security assistance. The crescent begins in Lebanon, continues through Syria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq and Iran, and ends in Tajikistan. Others believe the U.S. has encouraged Iraq's Kurds to demand independence for the same reasons.
- ***They worry about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict going unresolved, but the peace process is not a high priority.*** All would like it resolved but on security issues critical to regime survival, to quote Tip O'Neill, "All politics is local."
- ***They worry about the danger of unbalanced power.*** The GCC states and the U.S. have long preferred a security strategy based on the concept of balance of power. Since the British withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971 through 1990, when Saddam invaded Kuwait, U.S. regional security policy has tried to keep a minimal force presence in the region, using local surrogates and the threat of military intervention to keep the peace. From 1971 through 1978, we used the Twin Pillars strategy—based on our allies the Shah of Iran and the Al Sa'ud of Saudi Arabia—to police the Gulf for us. In the 1980s, responding in large part to pleas from the 6 Gulf rulers, the U.S. aided Iraq in its long war with Iran, and then tilted briefly towards Tehran out of concern for the fate of Americans held hostage by Hizballah in Lebanon and following requests from Israel. Gulf Arab rulers saw Saddam as their champion against Iranian efforts to export the revolution and depose them. They were not enthusiastic about the war in 2003 to remove Saddam Husayn from power. For most rulers, Saddam was a defanged tyrant, a bully kept in check by the U.S. and international opprobrium but whose loss was felt by those seeking an Arab power to balance a strengthening Iran. For their populations, Saddam was misunderstood, a hero for standing up to the Americans, the only Arab leader to try to "do something" to help the Palestinians fight Israel, and the only Muslim ruler to stand up to the Ayatollahs of Iran.

- ***They worry that the U.S. will abandon its long time allies for new friends among the Shia or the Kurds or the new Iraqi nationalists.*** Many in the neighborhood believe that the U.S. hasn't a clue on how to stabilize Iraq and will pull out before Baghdad can reassert its control on a country that is teetering on the brink of civil war. Both views are absurd, of course, but this is the Middle East. The essential point is that Iraqis, Iranians, and the governments of the Gulf will watch the U.S. very closely to see if it will honor its commitments to regional security and their own well-being.
- ***They worry about the impact of change, innovation.*** The collapse of the Sunni Arab Ba'thist regime in Iraq was not the only shock to regional security. In the past few years, Turkey has elected an Islamist government, Syria has announced its complete withdrawal from Lebanon following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and massive popular demonstrations, Yasir Arafat has died and been seemingly forgotten as Palestinians and Israel make conciliatory gestures towards resuming talks. But far more threatening has been the rise of Islamic extremism, sparked by the successes of Usama bin Ladin, the insurgencies in Iraq, and the specter of a resurgent Muslim Brotherhood in Syria.

What they do not worry about?

- ***They do not worry about how Iraq is ruled, but rather who rules Iraq.*** They have little interest in how democracy will evolve in Iraq, but they do fear the consequences of a Shia-dominated government—Iraq's Shia community represents more than 60 percent of the population and Gulf Arabs assume that Iraq will be ruled by an inexperienced, religiously volatile group of religious extremists and clerics who will tie Baghdad closely to Tehran. They misread Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the Iranian-born pre-eminent Shia cleric in Iraq who favors a government under Islamic law but opposes mullahs in government, but they correctly measure his popularity among Shia in Iran (an estimated 2-3 million followers according to some Iranian scholars) and among Shia communities in the Gulf states, where Najaf-trained clerics have long been influential. It is this last that is especially worrying in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, where approximately 20 percent of the populations are Shia Arab, and Bahrain, where nearly 75 percent may be Shia.
- ***They do not worry about political stagnation; they worry about change. They should, because they are in the midst of a period of change that could mean their replacement.*** The Gulf states are in the midst of changes brought on less by the arrival of democracy in Iraq than by fears that the chaos of Iraq, its ethnic and religious factions that are competing for power, and its extremists insurgencies will spill-over into the neighborhood. Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and even Saudi Arabia allow elections of some sort—Kuwait and Bahrain to national assemblies; Qatar, Oman and Saudi Arabia to municipal councils. In Saudi Arabia only men can vote, in Kuwait only men whose families have long held first-class citizenship. Women can vote and hold government posts in Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain, although

none has yet broken through to positions of real power or influence. Only the UAE has no elections, with tribal shaykhs still holding much of the wealth and power.

- ***They do not worry about a nuclear-armed Iran, they say, but they do see danger in a resurgent nationalist Iran.*** The danger stems from the renewed revolutionary zeal of the conservatives, resurgent Persian nationalism, and Iranians' assumption that they are the natural leaders of the Gulf — all of which makes the Gulf Arabs chary of both Tehran and Washington. A nuclear-armed Iran is not a greater threat than Iran without nuclear arms. And they reject the argument that Iran with nuclear weapons is a threat while Israel with its undeclared nuclear weapons is not a threat. If a nuclear-armed Iran is not, strictly speaking, a Gulf issue, then neither is it seen as an option they must anticipate or help resolve. If the United States or Israel sees the threat as serious, they say, then the U.S. and Israel will take care of it. Most Gulf Arabs would seem to prefer letting the United States and Israel resolve the Iran problem, but they also know that if a military option is pursued, then their region will be in crisis and they will have to “deal with it.” They blame the U.S. and Iran equally for the lack of regional security, and they deplore the absence of direct contacts between Tehran and Washington. In their opinion, this lack of dialogue will ultimately lead to a military confrontation. They see Iran as determined to pursue nuclear weapons at any cost, and the U.S. as determined on military confrontation with Iran. While many believe Iran has made its decision to pursue nuclear weapons, they also think that nothing can be done to walk Tehran back from its decision or Washington from its determination.

In the end, the GCC states are small and fragile, consumers of rather than contributors to their security. They need and prefer a protector from outside the region to survive. They believe that their only strategic option is to side with the United States. Despite a professed dislike of President Bush, unease with Iraq, and unhappiness with the direction of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East and Persian Gulf region, there is consensus among these Gulf Arabs that only the United States can be counted on to protect them, and that Iran—with or without nuclear weapons—is and will always be a constant strategic worry.

3. A Look Ahead: Iraqi Futures and Their Regional Consequences.

Iraq is a keystone state in the Middle East-Persian Gulf. In pre-Islamic times it looked east to Persia for governance and protection; from the 15th to the 20th century, it looked north to Ottoman Turkey for power and status; from 1920 to 1990 it looked west to the Arab states for identity, unity, and support. The direction Iraq faces in the future is unknown—for now, it seems neither east nor west, despite the pundits connecting of dots that equate Iraq and Shia governance with Iran and clerical rule—wrong.

So, what are the questions and what are the possibilities? Some answers and scenarios:

1. ***What will constitute a successful outcome for Iraq?*** In a word, the next election, and the one after that, and the one after that.

2. *Will Iraq's neighbors view success in the same manner as the U.S. or Iraq?* No.
3. *Can an economically and militarily strong, democratically ruled Iraq establish itself as a reliable regional security partner?* Yes and no.
4. *What issues will be the toughest to resolve?* All of them. There are no easy issues.
5. *Should Iraq fail to stabilize and develop economically and politically, what are the consequences for U.S. regional interests?* Yes.

Now, to explain the range of possibilities:

1. Success in Iraq:

- *For politicians and pundits*, this is measured as an exit strategy, “How soon will we bring the troops home?”
- *For Iraqis*, this is measured in security, their personal security, “Can we send our children to school or go shopping and to work safely.” “When will we have jobs?” “When will we have electricity 24/7, water, gasoline for our cars?”
- *My own measure?* When a Shia Arab married to a Sunni Kurd can take their son to school in Baghdad and vacation in the mountains of the north.

2. For the neighbors? When the threat of the insurgencies is over, the Islamist extremists disappear, and Iraq is pacified. Also when the balance of power is re-established as a strategic policy of all Gulf states—Iraq, Iran, and the GCC.

- When Iraq is strong enough to defend itself but too weak to act aggressively;
- When Iran is sufficiently post-revolution that it no longer seeks to export its revolution, does not use its new-found nuclear muscle to intimidate or force policies on its smaller and weaker neighbors;
- When the Americans can be unseen, unheard, but nearby.

3. Iraq's reliability as a regional security partner? I do not think that whether Iraq is an economically and militarily strong or weak power or is democratic or undemocratic will matter in its calculations on regional security. 2 factors are key to Iraq's future external behavior:

- If/when Iran completes its nuclear weapons and missile programs;
- If/when Iraqis start thinking about their role as natural leader of the Arabs and Gulf hegemon, and when they start to remember who sided with Saddam and where the neighbors were during the war of liberation.

4. Issues tough to resolve? All of them:

- *Who gets what:* ministries, appointments, ambassadorships, etc.
- *Constitution:* Who will decide what about federalism, role of Islam, 2/3 veto.
- *The Kurdish “issues”:* Kirkuk, secular government, oil revenues, Defense and Oil ministries, pesh merga as local security with no Arabs.
- *Shia issues:* Kirkuk, oil, rule of Shariah, clerics or not in government.
- *Sunni issues:* all of the above.
- Women's issues; Christian issues; Turkmen issues, etc.
- *What do Iraqis do about the 2 800 pound gorillas sitting in the refrigerator?* US and Iran, both of whom need to be careful what/how much they ask of the new and fragile government in Baghdad.

5. *Consequences should Iraq fail? Consequences will be serious for U.S. security and regional interests:*

- *Rule of terror will replace any hopes for rule of law; real risk of civil war, or at least open warlordism such as we saw this weekend where Sunni extremists take Shias living in a mixed village (Maadain) and order all Shia to leave.*
- *Regional imbalance of power with regimes afraid to host us and afraid if we leave;*
- *Arc of instability will spread and could include Lebanon, Syria, some of the Gulf states.*
- *Who will manage the liquid assets crises: oil and water?*

Alternative Scenarios:

1. *Iraq muddles thru:*

2. *Central government collapses because:*

- Barzani decides to flex his muscle in the north, bringing Iraq to the brink of civil war.
- Shia religious factions, with Sistani's tacit support, decide to push thru strict Islamic codes of justice and social behavior; Kurds object, women and Arab liberals object; Sunni extremists applaud application of Islamic law but oppose Shia model.

3. *Coalition government collapses because:*

- Inability of central government to impose its will on the parts of the state, failure to provide local security, jobs, improved standard of living;
- Failure to create an integrated national armed forces;
- Failure to protect borders against insurgents and greedy neighbors;
- Failure to contain squabbling among Islamists and non-Islamists, Kurds and non-Kurds, over critical social issues—education policy, health and welfare.